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More choices for military, foster parents

State Sen. Chip Rogers has introduced a new bill with the hope of reforming the educational quality received by Georgia's children.

This bill would supplement Georgia's Special Needs Scholarship Program, which provides private school vouchers for students with learning and physical disabilities.

The scholarship program was passed in 2007 and signed into law by Gov. Sonny Perdue in May of that year. Qualifying students may choose from a list of pre-approved private schools and receive tuition vouchers equal to the amount of public funds that would have been spent or the amount of private school tuition and fees, whichever is less.

Any private school may apply to be included on this list and be accepted after

meeting a set of credentials determined by the Georgia Department of Education.

Based on information from the education department, I see two major advantages to this voucher program.

First, it allows parents to choose the school that best meets the needs of their children. Income is no longer a factor for parents who determine a private school would provide a better educational environment and superior facilities for their children. Qualifying children are given an enhanced opportunity to excel despite their disabilities.

Second, this program had no impact on taxpayers because students who qualify receive funds equal to or less than the funds that would have been spent on them in public school. Therefore, no tax increase was necessary to fund this bill.

In fact, tax money is actually saved in the instance that private tuition and fees

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are less than the amount of public funds that would have been spent. This is likely not an uncommon event since private tuition is on average one-third less than public expenditures per pupil.

The new additions to this program would make vouchers available to students with parents in the military and to foster children. Sen. Rogers chose these groups because of their transient status.

Now, a qualifying student must have spent the past year attending a Georgia public school, and private schools have complete discretion in deciding whether to accept students who apply

for admission through the program.

The Savannah area is likely to benefit from these additions to the bill more than most areas in Georgia. Being the home to Hunter Army Airfield and Fort Stewart military bases, which together employ more than 42,000 people, a large percentage of the population near Savannah would be eligible for these vouchers.

Many parents with students coming from better out-of-state schools would be able to send their children to the best-quality schools in the area while they are stationed here.

In an Atlanta press confer-

ence on Feb. 3, Sen. Rogers revealed the additions to the voucher bill are only a stepping stone to eventually give all Georgia parents the same opportunity.

From my research in the field of education, it is evident offering parents more choices increases educational quality and generates better educational output from students.

For instance, North Carolina spends less per student, offers greater parental choice among schools and generates better educational output for each tax dollar spent than either Georgia or South Carolina.

Sen. Rogers may help lead the way for Georgia to follow suit and initiate successful reforms in the education of Georgia's students.

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Brooke Conaway



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